

# Wild News

Quarterly newsletter for La Trobe University's Wildlife Sanctuary

Issue 10: Winter 2010

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## From the Editor:

Before Europeans first settled in Bundoora, the River Red Gum woodlands would have been home to a variety of birds, mammals and other wildlife that unfortunately can no longer be found in the area.

Early settlers to the region are likely to have heard the Bush Stone-curlew making its wailing calls at night. Eastern Barred Bandicoots would have foraged for invertebrates and plant tubers amongst the grassy understorey, while Eastern Quolls also hunted invertebrates, as well as smaller birds and mammals.

When introduced predators such as cats and foxes are removed from the bush, native animals that have been suppressed or displaced are often quick to return. Unfortunately, many species that have disappeared from the surrounding landscape may not be able to come back on their own, but can prosper if given assistance.

This has been the case at feral-proof sanctuaries such as Mt. Rothwell at Little River, where regionally extinct mammals have been reintroduced and continue to thrive in the absence of introduced predators.

This edition of Wild News focuses on local and regional extinctions that have occurred due to human impacts, and efforts being made to reintroduce species that have declined locally.

## Twilight tours

Come on a guided spotlight tour of the La Trobe Wildlife Sanctuary after dark. While some nocturnal animals remain relatively inactive while the nights are still cool, Eastern Grey Kangaroos, Ringtail Possums and Brushtail Possums continue to forage, and Sugar Gliders and Tawny Frogmouths can also occasionally be seen. Microbats try their luck catching any active night-flying insects, while Grey-headed Flying Foxes feed on the open flowers of non-indigenous Spotted Gums. Most frogs are inactive at this time of year, although Common Froglets and Brown Tree Frogs continue to breed, and can be heard calling around most of the Sanctuary's wetlands.

Tours leave from the Education Rooms at 6:00 pm and run for approximately 1.5 hours. Bookings are essential.

### Cost:

Adults: \$20.00, Children: \$10.00, La Trobe staff/student and concession: \$10.00  
Free entry for children under 3 years of age accompanied by a paying adult.

Call the Sanctuary office on 9479 1206 or email [wildlife@latrobe.edu.au](mailto:wildlife@latrobe.edu.au) to make a booking.

## Indigenous plant nursery

The Nursery is open between 10:00 am and 3:00 pm on Tuesdays, Thursdays, Fridays and Sundays. Please note that the Sanctuary is open to the public six days a week (closed on Saturdays) from 10:00 am – 3:00 pm.

Phone 03 9479 2871 or email [plants@latrobe.edu.au](mailto:plants@latrobe.edu.au) for more information.

**Currently in flower:** The **Rock Correa** (*Correa glabra*) bears pale green bell-shaped flowers from May through to August, although it flowers sporadically at other times of year. This species grows on well-drained soils, and tolerates a range of situations from full sun to shade. The Rock Correa is bird-attracting, and may be the best indigenous plant for use in hedging and topiary as it has a rounded, compact form, grows quickly and responds well to pruning.



## Friends calendar:

### Sunday 29<sup>th</sup> August – Open for planting!

Join the Friends of the Wildlife Reserves on the University's Open Day to plant indigenous herbs and wildflowers in one of the Sanctuary's fenced-off habitat patches.

Meet outside the Rangers' office at 10:00 am (Parking off La Trobe Avenue; Melways 19 G5).

### Sunday 26<sup>th</sup> September – Community day and BBQ at Temple Ridge Reserve

Nillumbik City Council will be hosting a community day and BBQ at Temple Ridge Reserve in Hurstbridge. Learn about the history and management of the reserve, while keeping an eye out for native wildlife along the way. We will also be assisting with some weed control. Bring a camera and binoculars if you have them.

Meet at Temple Ridge Reserve, Hurstbridge at 10:00am (Melways 185 J11).



## Going... going... almost gone: the nearly-forgotten fauna of Melbourne's northern suburbs

It is difficult to know what a suburb like Bundoora might have been like before John Fawkner sailed up the Yarra River in 1935. This expedition was rapidly followed by the arrival of thousands of pastoralists into Victoria, bringing sheep and cattle over the Murray River from New South Wales. In 1851, gold was discovered in Warrandyte. By 1855, there were more people in Victoria than there were in the whole of Australia prior to that time. While this was a period of great prosperity for Melbourne's growing population, it marked an exponential increase the clearance of indigenous vegetation to provide timber and make way for agriculture. It also resulted in the arrival of a variety of introduced plants and animals that competed with the city's native wildlife.

Of the 91 species of non-marine mammal known from Victoria at the time of European settlement, 18 can no longer be found here. Five species of mammal known to have occurred in the state are now thought to have become totally extinct. Several species now absent from Victoria, including the Eastern Quoll and Tasmanian Bettong, are likely to have occurred in Bundoora. In addition, over a dozen species of native mammal still found in Victoria including the Common Dunnart, Bush Rat, Eastern Barred Bandicoot and Brush-tailed Phascogale can no longer be found locally.

The **Eastern-barred Bandicoot** (*Perameles gunnii*) was last recorded from Cragieburn and Plenty Gorge in the 1930's, and is likely to have once been widespread on the volcanic plains west of Melbourne, and in grassy woodlands in the northern suburbs. A wild population was rediscovered on the Australian mainland in the 1990's, sheltering under old car bodies at the municipal garbage tip in Hamilton! The last confirmed sighting of a wild individual on the mainland was in 2002. Efforts are now underway to maintain three reintroduced populations at the Hamilton Community Parklands, Mooramong and Mount Rothwell. Eastern Barred Bandicoots remain locally common in eastern Tasmania.



Both Spot-tailed Quolls (*Dasyurus maculatus maculatus*) and Eastern Quolls (*Dasyurus viverrinus*) were recorded across Melbourne during the 1920's and 30's. These marsupials were once referred to as 'native-cats', in reference to their cat-like appearance and carnivorous habits, although the Eastern Quoll also consumes a substantial amount of plant material including grass shoots and fruits. Both species are thought to have been relatively common on the plains and surrounding foothill forests around Melbourne, although Eastern Quolls may have been more abundant in these habitats. The last Eastern Quoll collected from Melbourne was found at Studley Park in 1948, while Spot-tailed Quolls may still present in low numbers in the taller forests north-east of the city. One wandering Spot-tailed Quoll famously found its way into a suburban chook shed in Ringwood in 1983!

While the Eastern Quoll can still be found in Tasmania, some other mammals have not been so lucky, and have become extinct from their entire range. The **White-footed Rabbit-rat** (*Conilurus albipes*) may have once been abundant throughout much of southern Victoria prior to European settlement, but is now only known from illustrations and museum specimens. Accounts from early settlers report this species as having been common, frequently raiding pantries and seed stores.

Although many native mammals that would have once been common around Melbourne's northern suburbs have succumb to the pressures of habitat loss and predation by introduced species, a number of reptiles, frogs and birds have also declined, and even some 'common' species have become absent from the region since European settlement.

Jacky Dragons (*Amphibolurus muricatus*) and White's Skinks (*Liopholis whitii*) were once widespread and common throughout most of greater Melbourne, including the University's conservation reserves. Both of these species have since undergone substantial declines across much of Greater Melbourne over the past few decades, largely due to habitat loss and fragmentation. These lizards are now absent from most suburban bushland remnants, although a small and isolated population White Skinks can still be found in the University's conservation reserves, and Jacky Dragons remain reasonably common nearby in Plenty Gorge. The Large Striped Skink (*Ctenotus robustus*) and Tussock Skink (*Pseudomoia pagestecheri*) have also declined locally.

The Growling Grass Frog (*Litoria raniformis*) was once a common sight in suburban ponds across Greater Melbourne, but has experienced substantial declines across its range over the past few decades. It is now absent from most of inner Melbourne, but can still be found in some wetlands and slow-flowing sections of creeks north and west of the city. Reasons for this species's decline are likely to include habitat loss, predation by introduced fish and apparent susceptibility of this species to the amphibian Chytrid fungus.

While many birds can escape introduced predators such as cats and foxes, species that nest or forage on the ground are particularly vulnerable. The **Bush Stone-curlew** (*Burhinus grallarius*) is a nocturnal ground-dwelling bird that largely relies on camouflage to hide from predators. This species nests on the ground in areas with sparse plant cover, but sufficient fallen timber to enable it to 'hide' effectively from predators. The Bush Stone-curlew was relatively widespread in Victoria during the early 1900's, and could be found on the plains and grassy woodlands in northern Melbourne prior to about the 1940's.

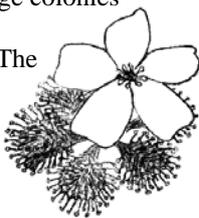


The Plains Wanderer (*Pedinomus torquatus*) is another cryptically-coloured ground-nesting bird that has become largely absent from the grassy plains north and west of Melbourne, although it may still be persist in the area in low numbers, having occasionally been recorded in remnant grasslands along the Merri Creek. The Plains Wanderer is a weak flier, and will stand still or run rather than fly when disturbed, making it particularly vulnerable to predation by cats and foxes.

Although these and several other species that may have once been common in the Greater Melbourne area are yet to make a comeback, some success has been achieved in attempting to manage threatening processes that have resulted in their decline. There are currently plans to reintroduce several locally and regionally extinct species into the La Trobe Wildlife Sanctuary once introduced predators have been eliminated and it can be ensured that impacts from surrounding land uses can be adequately managed. The first stage of this project is now nearing completion, with less than 1 km of predator-roof fence remaining to be installed.

## Winter Wildlife Diary

The **Scented Sundew** (*Drosera aberrans*) has rounded leaves forming a basal rosette. This species can form large colonies in ideal conditions, and is capable of reproducing asexually through giving rise to daughter tubers. The green to red leaves are covered in stalked glands that exude sticky mucilage. Insects that land on the leaves become stuck, and are slowly digested by enzymes in the sticky fluid. During summer, these plants die back to an underground tuber, re-emerging in autumn before flowering from late July to October. As its common name suggests, the large white flowers are scented, having a honey-like fragrance.



The Tall Sundew (*Drosera peltata*) grows in La Trobe's conservation reserves including the Wildlife Sanctuary, and can be seen flowering in spring beside the gravel track leading to Main Lake from Ironbarks Hut. As sundews are able to obtain much of their nutrients from the invertebrates they digest, they are often capable of growing on nutrient-poor soils.

From early autumn, female **Common Bent-wing Bats** (*Miniopterus schreibersii*) arrive and congregate with males in tunnels and culverts around Melbourne's northern suburbs, including old mineshafts along the Plenty Gorge. While here, the bats mate and overwinter, maintaining a low body temperature and reducing their metabolic rate. Most female Common Bent-wing Bats overwintering in the Melbourne area congregate in a single cave near Lakes Entrance in October and November, where they each give birth to a single young over summer. The young bats are independent from 10 weeks of age, and leave the maternity caves around late March.

The **Dwarf Galaxias** (*Galaxiella pusilla*) is one of the smallest freshwater fish in Australia and the smallest Victorian native fish,



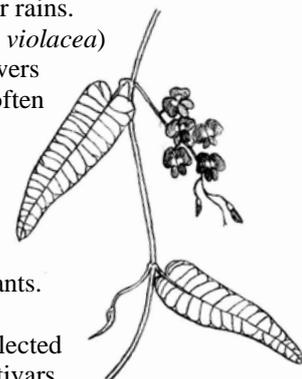
growing to a maximum size of less than 5 cm. This fish lives in the vegetated margins of creeks, swamps and drainage lines, and was once common in these habitats over much of southern Victoria. The Dwarf Galaxias appears capable of withstanding desiccation when temporary water bodies dry up during summer, possibly by taking refuge in crayfish burrows until the arrival of autumn rains. Breeding takes place over a few weeks between August and September each year, with females depositing several clutches of eggs amongst flooded vegetation. Most adults die after their first spawning. This mode of reproduction where offspring are produced in one main breeding event giving rise to single-aged cohorts is known as semelparity.

Dwarf Galaxids from the Dandenong Creek system were introduced into Galaxiella Billabong over 15 years ago, and are now present throughout some of the Sanctuary's other wetlands. This has proven to be an important insurance population for the species in Melbourne, especially as it is not known whether the original source population remains in existence.

Tadpoles of the **Eastern Banjo Frog** or Pobblebonk (*Limnodynastes dumerilii*) are capable of overwintering, undergoing metamorphosis in spring. Other tadpoles that hatch from eggs laid in spring are likely to emerge as juvenile frogs in autumn. The large, dark tadpoles can grow to over 7 cm long, and are mostly bottom dwellers, feeding on vegetation and other organic particles amongst sediment.

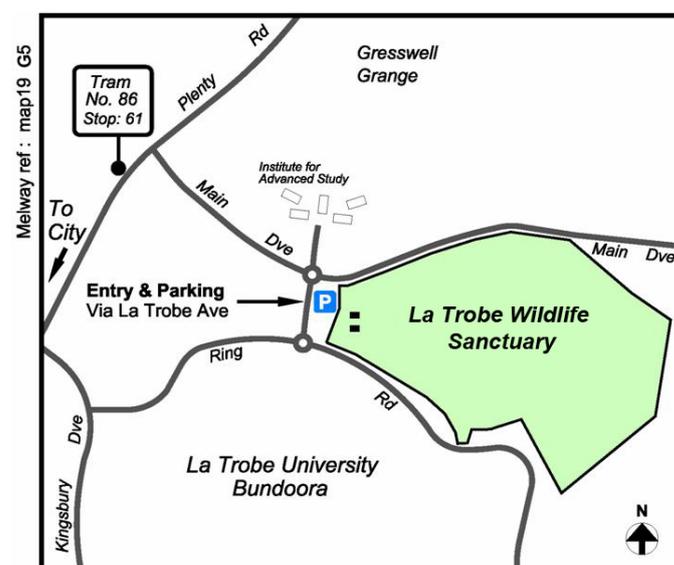
While colour is most apparent in the bush during spring, some plants flower weeks in advance, standing out amongst lush new undergrowth resulting from winter rains.

The **Purple Coral Pea** (*Hardenbergia violacea*) bears arching sprays of purple pea flowers from July to November. This plant is often sold commercially as garden cultivars including 'Happy Wanderer'. While these forms tend to be more vigorous than the wild type, they may pose a significant risk to the local gene pool through cross-pollinating with wild plants. The wild form is often grown by local indigenous nurseries, and should be selected in place of commercially available cultivars where possible.



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